



PROGRAM NOTES

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CONTENTS

		<u>Page</u>
THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL	Rita TheBerge	1
TOUCH OF EVIL	David Rodowick	7
UMBERTO D.	Nick Barbaro	15
THIS SPORTING LIFE	Holly Chacona	21
HANGMEN ALSO DIE	David Rodowick	27
STRIKE	Nick Barbaro	33
END OF ST. PETERSBURG	Joe Rape	45
DR. MABUSE, DER SPIELER	Ed Lowry	
Part I: THE GAMBLER	Nick Barbaro	
Part II: KING OF CRIME		51
THE TESTAMENT OF DR. MABUSE	Nick Barbaro	65
THE THOUSAND EYES OF DR. MABUSE	Ed Lowry	71
THE CRIMINAL LIFE OF ARCHIBALDO DE LA CRUZ	Rita TheBerge	77
LONG PANTS		
SHERLOCK JR.	David Rodowick	83
SANSHO DAYU (THE BAILIFF)	Holly Chacona	91
SEVEN CHANCES	Joe Rape	99

Front cover: Rudolph Klein-Rogge as Dr. Mabuse.

Back cover:

Top - Orson Welles and Akim Tamiroff in TOUCH OF EVIL.
Middle - Rudolph Klein-Rogge in DR. MABUSE, DER SPIELER.
Bottom - Buster Keaton in SEVEN CHANCES.



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THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL (1951)

Directed by Robert Wise. Produced by Julian Blaustein. Screenplay: Edmund H. North. Story: Henry Bates. Music: Bernard Herrmann. Director of Photography: Leo Tover. Art Direction: Lyle Wheeler and Addison Hehr. Set Decoration: Thomas Little and Claude Carpenter. Editor: William Reynolds. Wardrobe Direction: Charles Le Maire. Costumes by Travilla. Klaatu's Costume by Perkins Barley. Makeup: Ben Nye. Special Effects: Fred Sersen. Sound: Arthur L. Kirbach and Harry M. Leonard. 20th Century Fox.

(Distributor of tonight's print: Films Incorporated; 733 Green Bay Rd.; Wilmette, IL 60091.) Running time: 92 minutes.

CAST: Michael Rennie (Klaatu), Patricia Neal (Helen Benson), Hugh Marlowe (Tom Stevens), Sam Jaffe (Dr. Barnhardt), Billy Gray (Bobby Benson), Frances Gray (Mrs. Barley), Frances Bavier (Mrs. Barley), Lock Martin (Gort), Drew Pearson (Himself), Frank Conroy (Harley), Carleton Young (Colonel), Fay Roope (Major General), Earth Evanson (Mrs. Crockett), Robert Osterloh (Major White), Ryler McVey (Brady), James Seay (Government man), John Brown (Mr. Barley), Marjorie Grossland (Hilda), Glenn Hardy (Interviewer).



The 1950's were a decade of particular cynicism and dissatisfaction. World War II ended with more disillusionment than celebration. The attempts at peace were chaotic and tenuous. Russia had demonstrated a concerted effort to subjugate Eastern European countries, over-taking Rumania, Poland and Czechoslovakia, and directing East Germany toward an industrialization that disconcerted the Allies. China was torn between Mao Tse-tung's Communism and the Nationalism of Chiang Kai-shek. Miscalculated foreign policy embroiled the U. S. in an unpopular "police action" in Korea and the inflation of the Truman administration added to the American unrest. Russia's atomic power and the refusal of Communist nations to cooperate in attempts to limit the nuclear arms race further aggravated world tensions and American paranoia.

It is understandable that American filmmakers should attempt to resolve something of this mass hysteria in their pictures. And, clearly, it is intriguing to assign the evils and dissatisfactions of society to some foreign cause. An alien being, tremendously powerful, and bent on destruction presented the perfect image to vindicate paranoia. At the same time, the science fiction film allowed an opportunity for disaster, gleeful and rampant destruction, replete with panicking crowds and tons of rubble. With this violent mess-making, man relived his recent wars with the justification that, this time at least, it was the work of something evil and alien and not man, himself, who caused such self-defeating chaos.

In her essay "The Imagination of Disaster," Susan Sontag discusses the predictability of the plots of science fiction films. The arrival of the thing, the monster or spaceship is usually witnessed by a lone hero who spends a great deal of energy convincing others of their imminent danger. Soon, however, the truth to his story is made irrevocably obvious, and there follow many conferences and discussions between the military and the scientists. Mass destruction develops at this point with both humans and aliens reeking havoc. Finally, an ultimate weapon is developed and the aliens are repelled while hero and heroine embrace, happy to have saved the world.

This plot has an inexpensive variation for black and white film. The theme is the same, but events occur on a smaller scale. The invasion occurs in relative isolation and hero and heroine are cut off from most of the rest of the world. They discover the aliens vulnerability quite by accident and save the world without its knowledge. Possibly, too, the hero may give up his isolation and enlist military and scientific assistance.

These plot analyses fit THE THING (1950; seen at CinemaTexas, Fall, 1976) more closely than THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL (1951). In THE THING our heroes are isolated. The monster is clearly obnoxious and aggressive. The military hierarchy is so slow in acting that the small group at the North Pole must take matters in hand. They discover the Thing's destructibility and carry out his annihilation with a crude, home-made weapon. The scientist is so fanatical he inspires only laughter and disgust and, in the end, the military men blithely vent violence and destruction. Finally, the film ends with a global warning: "Watch the skies"--a plea for the unification of mankind in vigilance against the external enemy.

In view of this brutal vengeance, THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL seems surprisingly calm. Nor was it well received by critics in its time. In the

New York Times review of September 19, 1951, Bosley Crowther quipped,

. . . once this contraption is down and its pilots have emerged from its innards on the Ellipse in Washington, they turn out to be such decent fellows, so well-mannered and peacefully inclined, that you'd hardly expect them to split an infinitive, let alone an atom or a human head. Indeed, the more important of these creatures . . . is in the nature of a super emissary, sent to earth from on the planets to counsel peace. And so benign is his disposition, even when he arranges things so the flow of all the world's electricity is stopped for an awesome half-hour, that he inspires one more with admiration than with bewilderment or fear.

Likewise, Michael Rennie, who plays this genteel soul, while charmingly suave and cosmopolitan, is likely to cause unguarded yawns.

His giant mechanical assistant, which someone named Lock Martin animates, is also oddly unmenacing, for all his grossness and his death-ray eye, we've seen better monsters in theatre audiences on 42nd St.

It is comforting, of course, to have it made plain that our planetary neighbors are much wiser and more peaceful than are we, but this makes for a tepid entertainment in what is anomalously labeled the science fiction field.

Crowther was not immune to DAY's subtleties; he simply didn't want them. Instead of a horribly ugly, invading force from outer space, DAY gives us the quietly attractive and reasonable Klaatu. Klaatu repeats again and again that he has come on a friendly mission to help us. The director, Robert Wise, depicts most of the humans Klaatu encounters as incredibly stupid and violent--the two very things Klaatu's planet has abolished. Yet these hordes of curious and frightened onlookers are very typical of the McCarthy paranoia of the 50's. The senselessness of this fear cannot be penetrated by the sensitivity of Klaatu's benign show of power. Klaatu himself is more worried about Gort's instincts than all the powers that Earth can muster. As Susan Sontag says of the typical science fiction film, "again and again one detects the hunger for a 'good war,' which poses no moral problems, admits of no moral qualifications . . ." But DAY will not allow that. It is quietly judgemental.

"There is absolutely no social criticism, of even the most implicit kinds, in science fiction films" says Sontag. "Also the notion of science as a social activity, interlocking with social and political interests, is unacknowledged." Yet THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL seems to belie this generality.

As in other sci-fi films the scientist is shunted aside for military purposes. But this neglect is viewed as unacceptable in the film. He is so frustrated by politics and "petty squabbles," that he seeks out the intellectuals for the receptive ears he needs to deliver his message. Yet, at the last minute, the conference of scientists is canceled by the Army General, who is prepared to fight something he doesn't understand rather than accept an explanation he might not want to hear. Our sympathy is with Klaatu and Dr. Bernhardt. It is social criticism enough that, within this film, Klaatu takes on the aura of a cult hero with intellectualism and pacificism as his credo.

Social criticism is taken further as it touches on the fear of Communism. The woman at the boarding house isn't taken too seriously when she implies the Reds sent over the space ship, and she appears ludicrous in her innuendos. Klaatu, himself, constantly reminds Secretary Harley that he isn't interested in Earth's problems of coexistence. The important conflicts are not the details of mass paranoia, but a fear that can be destructive.

Fear is the operative destructive force in DAY. Klaatu is shot shortly after landing because a jittery soldier mistakes his gift for a weapon. His objective of meeting with world leaders is frustrated by the mutual distrust among politicians. He instigates a disappearance in order to evade the military and political constraints on him, so that he can discover the nature of the common man. Distressingly, he finds mostly stupidity and irrationality.

Ironically, fear of the robot, Gort, is justified, for even Klaatu and his fellow aliens are unable to control that entity when he revenges aggression; and by their very desire to immobilize the robot guard, Earth men are reinforcing their aggressive life style. Unwittingly, they are protecting their right to violence by attempting to destroy their future policemen.

DAY is intriguing because it magnifies the implications of human destructiveness. It is perfectly all right with Klaatu, even with his planet, if the silly humans annihilate themselves. But beware the vengeance of the universe if we should allow aggression to invade the quiet calm of the stars.

DAY does not fit the 1950's with its literary and philosophical scoldings. Yet it reflects the ideology of Truman and portrays a desire for peace that was spawned in the decade. Just as Klaatu affirms, "We do not pretend to have achieved perfection," neither did American McCarthyism achieve complete insidiousness. The senator merely exploited a popular myth which, all too often, he is given credit for having invented.

Suggestions for further reading:

- Hodgens, Richard. "A Brief, Tragical History of the Science Fiction Film," *Film Quarterly*, XIII (Winter 1959), 30-39.
- Johnson, William, ed. *Focus on the Science Fiction Film*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972.
- Sontag, Susan. "The Imagination of Disaster," *Against Interpretation*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1969.

Robert Wise filmography:

(Former editor on CITIZEN KANE, ALL THAT MONEY CAN BUY, THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS.) 1944--MADEMOISELLE FIFI, CURSE OF THE CAT PEOPLE. 1945--THE BODY SNATCHER. 1946--A GAME OF DEATH, CRIMINAL COURT. 1947--BORN TO KILL, MYSTERY IN MEXICO. 1948--BLOOD ON THE MOON. 1949--THE SET-UP. 1950--THREE SECRETS, TWO FLAGS WEST. 1951--THE HOUSE ON TELEGRAPH HILL, THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL. 1952--CAPTIVE CITY, DESTINATION GOBI, SOMETHING FOR THE BIRDS, DESERT RATS. 1953--SO BIG. 1954--EXECUTIVE SUITE. 1955--HELEN OF TROY. 1956--TRIBUTE TO A BAD MAN, SOMEBODY UP THERE LIKES ME. 1957--UNTIL THEY SAIL, THIS COULD BE THE NIGHT. 1958--RUN SILENT RUN DEEP, I WANT TO LIVE. 1959--ODDS AGAINST TOMORROW. 1961--WEST SIDE STORY. 1962--TWO FOR THE SEE SAW. 1963--THE HAUNTING. 1965--THE SOUND OF MUSIC. 1966--THE SAND PEBBLES. 1968--STAR! 1970--THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN. 1973--TWO PEOPLE.

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